

Ain'thology

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The History and Life of a Taboo Word

Edited by

Patricia Donaher and Seth Katz

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From Trish:

For Ian and Liam, the lights and center of my life.

From Seth:

For my father, who taught me to read the dictionary,
And my mother who took me to the library. Often.
For Mara, Sophie, and Elie who teach me every day.
And, as always, for Barb: my best friend
and my strong right hand.

From the Contributors:

To our friend and leader Trish Donaher
November 10, 1959—November 04, 2014:
thinker, doer, teacher, scholar.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	ix
-----------------------	----

Introduction	1
<i>Patricia Donaher and Seth Katz</i>	

I. AUTHORITY

Chapter One	16
<i>Ain't in the Dictionary</i>	
<i>Patricia Donaher</i>	

Chapter Two	45
<i>Ain't Online: Internet-Based Prescriptive and Descriptive Views</i>	
<i>on the Ultimate Taboo Word</i>	
<i>Deborah Schaffer</i>	

Chapter Three	72
<i>Historical Development and Aspectual Nuances of Ain't-Periphrases</i>	
<i>K. Aaron Smith</i>	

II. AUTHENTICITY

Chapter Four	96
<i>Children's Production of Ain't</i>	
<i>Karen Lynn Miller</i>	

Chapter Five	113
<i>The Syntax of Ain't</i>	
<i>John Foreman</i>	

Chapter Six	156
<i>"You ain't seen nothing yet": The Distribution of Ain't in The Linguistic</i>	
<i>Atlas of the Middle Rockies</i>	
<i>Lamont D. Antieau</i>	

Chapter Seven.....	178
The Interplay of Morphological, Phonological, and Social Constraints for <i>Ain't</i> in Appalachia	
<i>Kirk Hazen, Jacqueline Kinnaman, Lily Holz, Madeline Vandevender and Kevin Walden</i>	

III. AFFILIATION

Chapter Eight.....	196
¿Cómo Se Dice <i>Ain't</i> in Spanish? <i>Ain't</i> Use in Latino Comics	
<i>Agnès C.M. Ragone</i>	

Chapter Nine.....	227
Language Change in a Post-Creole, British Contact Setting: Non-Standard <i>Ain't</i> Negation	
<i>Michelle Braña-Straw</i>	

Chapter Ten	249
"It ain't over 'til it's over"; and, It Certainly Ain't Over Yet: <i>Ain't</i> in the Lexicon of Baseball	
<i>Jeffrey O. Segrave</i>	

IV. ACCOMMODATION

Chapter Eleven	274
"Ain't no translation good enough?": A Comparison of the Use of <i>Ain't</i> in English Original and Translated Literary Texts	
<i>Rudy Loock</i>	

Chapter Twelve	298
Ain't No <i>Bones</i> About It: Dialect Discrimination in Primetime	
<i>James G. Mitchell</i>	

Chapter Thirteen.....	323
Literary <i>Ain't</i> : A Survey Based on the Examples in <i>The Oxford English Dictionary</i>	
<i>Seth Katz</i>	

Contributors.....	359
-------------------	-----

Index.....	362
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INTRODUCTION

PATRICIA DONAHER AND SETH KATZ

While the word *ain't* has often been vilified as one of the most salient marks of a speaker's low social standing and lack of education, it is, nonetheless, used by speakers of all dialects and sociolects of English. As R. W. Burchfield, the long-time editor of *The Oxford English Dictionary*, noted in his entry on *ain't* in *The New Fowler's Modern English Usage* (1996), "For over 200 years the bar sinister word *ain't* has been begging for admission to standard English It stands, as it were, at the door, out on the pavement, not yet part of any standard paradigm in the drawing room, except of course in catchphrases and in other contexts of referential humor" (p. 38). And this is the crux of the issue for this volume: *ain't* is often denigrated, but why? Those who detest the usage often rail at the form without understanding its legitimacy in a number of dialects—once again raising the oft-stated stereotypes of the users' speech as "lazy" or "stupid." Others, especially educated individuals, see the word on its deathbed, used only in very specific cases. Neither of these opinions tells the true story of *ain't* historically and in modern usage. The goal of this book, dedicated to the topic of this single word, is to shed a large amount of light on the versatility, beauty, and vibrancy of the word in past and modern English—something not yet achieved in other articles that have some connection to the study of *ain't*.

To conceive of the importance of this word as linguistic taboo, we simply need to imagine all of the arguments the word has engendered in both lay and academic circles. Want to get blue collar laborers to open up over a few drinks? Bring up the topic of *ain't*—and watch the beer fly. Want to rile up a bunch of school teachers? Broach the idea that *ain't* is a legitimate form in their students' language. Want to get intellectuals, the well-read public going? Suggest that even professionals resort to its use. Want to see the language experts have a go? Suggest that *ain't* is still alive, well, and an important part of daily discourse in world Englishes. In other words: everyone has an opinion on the word and its place or non-place in our language. Even as we edit these words, the grammar-checker in Microsoft Word flags every instance of *ain't* with a red underscore. This is

a topic that appeals to the masses, from the least educated speaker to the most educated specialist and it therefore deserves greater consideration than that given by the few articles and sections of books over the past 100 years that have reviewed its history or discussed it in dialect contexts. Even the broad and judicious discussion of *ain't* in *Webster's Dictionary of English Usage* (1989) begins by observing,

The history of *ain't* is both complicated and obscure, and the amount of real historical investigation devoted to it has been very small compared to the reams of paper that have been written to condemn it. Much of what has been written is not informative, and some of it is misinformative. (p. 60)

The goal of this collection is to provide a complex, multifaceted understanding of the place of—and the controversies surrounding—*ain't* in the history of English; in the grammar of English; in English speech, writing, television, comics and other media; and in relation to the minds, attitudes, and usage of speakers and writers of English from a range of regions, ethnicities, social classes, and dialect communities. For this reason, the book is designed to appeal to a broad audience of readers, from the educated layperson to the linguist. Most articles are approachable for the average educated speaker, while others are directed primarily at the specialists in linguistic study—but with helpful explanations and footnotes to make these articles more approachable to the layperson. For this reason, the book does not have to be read in order of chapters. Rather, readers can dive in based on their interests and expertise. Some of the primary questions that the essays in this collection address include:

1. Who still uses *ain't*?
2. How are those users portrayed by other speakers?
3. Under what conditions and for what purposes is *ain't* used?
4. How do these uses of *ain't* translate grammatically?
5. Can we change people's attitudes towards the word *ain't*?
6. And just what are people's attitudes nowadays?

While *ain't* has been studied and discussed in many important scholarly articles and sections of larger works on the English language, the history of English, English grammar and English dialects, this is the first book-length collection of articles focused specifically on *ain't*. The study of the individual word *ain't* is essential to any English dialect and cultural study because of its extensive use as a non-Standard form both in the US and the UK, and because of its versatility as a verb form to mean *am not*, *aren't*, and *isn't*, as well as *hasn't*, *haven't*, *hadn't*, and, in some dialects,

didn't, *don't* and *doesn't*. Until now, however, the focus on *ain't* has been primarily in three specific areas: the variation of meaning *ain't* can have within the context of conversation or a particular dialect; speculation on how the pronunciation of *ain't* came about; and speculation on origins. Accounts of the origin of *ain't* remain speculative because there is simply not as much corroborating evidence for any one account as is available for other words in the English language, like the development of *béon* and *wesan* as variants of the *to be* verb, with *béon* denoting *am* and *wesan* denoting *was*, while *be* came late to the party, even though, as *The Oxford English Dictionary* notes, "*be* is not part of the substantive verb originally" (2014, "be"). Other contractions in English, especially *can't*, *don't*, and *won't*, have all been more extensively researched and placed within the context of the development of contracted forms. And while contractions were vilified somewhat by the 18th century proponents of an English Academy based upon the French system, many contractions gained a place within the language, lacking as they do the degree of vilification of *ain't*. School teachers may still say "no" to their students using these accepted contracted forms in a formal paper, but they do not openly despise these everyday forms. Ironically, many teachers from a variety of ethnic and regional dialects also use *ain't*—often unconsciously; yet, when presented with the word in a paper or on a test question, they openly denounce its use as "wrong in all circumstances."

Studies of *ain't* are scattered over a large number of years, and those studies are sparse in their investigations. *Ain'thology: The History and Life of a Taboo Word* aims to rectify this situation by bringing past research together with new, exciting research in areas not addressed by past studies. There is in fact a lot to say about *ain't*, far more than one would expect to find from the sporadic studies of the past. Of course, all the major dictionaries include an entry on the word, with the most extensive articles appearing in *The Oxford English Dictionary* (2014), the *Dictionary of American Regional English* (2012), and *Webster's Dictionary of English Usage* (WDEU, 1989). Even Noah Webster (1828) provided a first attempt to trace *an't* etymologically—an early spelling, but ambiguous pronunciation of the word—to Danish or Swedish cognates. Samuel Johnson (1755) doesn't bother to include the word at all. Historical linguists have also provided us some useful information about the possible origins of the word and its variations in usage. These include Harold H. Bender (1936), E. Payson Willard (1936) and Otto Jespersen's extended study of English grammar (1961). It is Jespersen's extensive breakdown of contractions and *ain't* in particular, utilizing historical, and particularly literary documents as examples, that forms the basis for much research on

ain't, including most modern studies (see Jenny Cheshire, 1981 and Lieselotte Anderwald, 2002, for example). For the origin of *ain't* as a contraction of forms of *to be*, Jespersen gave what has remained the most commonly accepted account of *ain't* as derived from *am not*, with the assimilation of /m/ to the neighboring /n/ as well as lengthening and diphthongization of /æ/ to /ei/. He explained that *ain't* could have also developed from *aren't* via the loss of postvocalic /r/ and the diphthongization of the vowel /a/ to /ei/. Finally, Jespersen suggested that *ain't* in the third person singular developed from *isn't* after the loss of the fricative /z/ and the change of the vowel from /ɪ/ to /ei/ (1961, pp. 431-434).

Jespersen's derivation for *ain't* is critiqued by *WDEU* (1989, p. 60), and roundly criticized by Michael Montgomery (2014), who points out that "Jespersen's proposals are problematic in being poorly attested and in sometimes relying on intermediate forms for which the orthographic evidence is very skimpy or that require phonological interpretations that are seemingly *ad hoc*" (p. 33). *WDEU* adds other problems to the mix, astutely observing,

One of the things that makes *ain't* stand out is its apparent lack of direct connection to any of the inflected forms of *be*: *am*, *is*, *are*, *were*, *was*, etc. The reason is ultimately a shift in the way we perceive words. When *ain't* was first used in writing in the early 18th century, the spelling represented a way of pronouncing the word. Nowadays, we tend to pronounce a word according to the way we see it spelled. Thus, *ain't* looks stranger to us than it did to those who spoke and wrote it two or three centuries ago. (p. 60)

Ain't entered the written language before the process of codification was entirely under way: the whole industry of printing, editing, dictionary making, and language punditry had yet to coordinate itself in ways that would, over the course of the 18th century, lead to the growing standardization of spelling in the language of formally educated folk, and to the heavy influence of print conventions on even the speech and the private and informal writing of the educated.

It is simply not clear from the existing evidence (a) whether *ain't* (or its earlier form, *an't*) developed as Jespersen derives it, through three separate paths; (b) whether it developed first from a contraction of *am not*, which then influenced the contraction of *are not*—or (c) vice versa; or (d), as Bender (1936) proposes, *an't* arose almost simultaneously from both *am not* and *are not*—and that the usage was then extended to be a contraction of *is not*. Then there is the further problem of (e) a possible fifth origin

path for *ain't* in its use for *have not*, *has not*, and eventually *had not*. The usage note for *have* in the *OED* proposes a sort of "weathering" process for the development of *ain't* = *have not*.

Even the later *v*, for Old English *bb*, was worn down in colloquial and dialect speech, so that Old English *habban* passed through Middle English *habben*, *haven*, *han*, to later *ha*, *ha'*, Scottish *hae*. These phonetic weakenings, due largely to the weakness and stresslessness of the word in many uses, both as principal verb and as auxiliary, have given rise to a very great number of historical forms for every inflected part, a number further increased by the graphic interchange of *f*, *v*, and *u*, and by the frequent dropping of initial *h*. The *ne plus ultra* of all these tendencies is seen in the reduction of Old English *habban* to *a*, or its entire elision, as in *I would a been*, occas. Scottish *I wad been*. (2014)

It is with that "frequent dropping of initial *h*" that *han't* (the negative of *han*) changes to *an't* and *ain't* with the meaning "have/has not." *WDEU* (1989) finds this derivation "fairly straightforward" (p. 60), though evidence in print sources remains sketchy-to-elusive. And, as K. Aaron Smith argues in this volume, the further extension of the use of *ain't* to forms of *didn't* and *don't* as auxiliaries may simply indicate that the pervasive use of *ain't* as a negative form of the auxiliary verbs *be* and *have* in many English dialects has led to *ain't* becoming a generic negative auxiliary in itself, separated from its roots in shifting pronunciations of contracted forms of *am not*, *are not*, *have not*, and *has not*.

Anatoly Liberman (2014) goes even further than Montgomery (2014) in his criticism not only of Jespersen's work, but also the mid-century work on the origins of *ain't* by linguists like Raven McDavid (1941), Harry P. Warfel (1933), and Martin Stevens (1954). Liberman methodically works through and discards most of the previous arguments for the origin of *ain't*. Finally, he quotes Stevens (1954):

One of two premises must be accepted in the light of historical and phonological facts: (1) Each of the contractions *am not*, *are not*, *is not*, *has not*, *have not*, developed into *ain't* independently. (2) One or two of the forms developed by regular sound change and then were analogically extended. The latter explanation seems to me more probable. (p. 200)

And following Stevens's premise (2), Liberman (2014) settles on an explanation that derives *ain't* by an ingenious path from the contraction of *have not*:

When, in the Midlands, *has* replaced *hath*, *he hathn't*, with *th* pronounced as [ð], became *he hasn't*, and the contractions *he's not* became ambiguous: it could mean *he hasn't* and *he isn't*, just, as today, *he's gone* may be understood as *he is gone* and *he has gone*. (Similar confusion marks the use of 'd: *he'd come* = *he would come* and *he had come*, and unschooled people often write *he would of come*, because in their weak forms *of* and *have* are homophones). (p. 179)

Thus we have a path by which the contracted negatives of both *is not* and *has not* could come to have the same phonological realization in *ain't*. Liberman concludes that this change could not have occurred before the middle of the 17th century and the demise of *hath* (that is, post Shakespeare and the King James Bible), which corresponds with "Warfel's (1933, p. 412) belief that *ain't* had arisen around 1660" and "connects the rise of *ain't* with a well-documented change of *hath* to *has*" (Liberman, 2014, p. 179).

While Liberman may have arrived at at least part of an explanation for the origin of *ain't* and how it came to be used for forms of both *be + not* and *have + not*, there is still more to be explained about the complexities in the development of *ain't* and its variants. For example, from 1667 to the late 1700s, we find *han't* as a contraction for *have not* (though rarely for *has not*) in the English authors cited in the *OED*. The spelling *ain't* for *have not* is first attested in print in 1819, and the *OED* only cites American sources until 1875. Where does the transition from *han't* to *ain't* (for *have not*) occur in English speaking and writing? Dickens, a keen observer of the varieties of English pronunciation, uses *han't* very rarely throughout his works; he also uses *ain't* for *is not* about 60% of the time. He does not use *isn't* at all in *Pickwick Papers* (1836) or *Oliver Twist* (1910 [1837]); he uses *isn't* a few times in *Bleak House* (1853), and late in his career, in *Our Mutual Friend* (1865), he uses *isn't* 27 times—a third as often as he uses *ain't* to mean *is not*. But as early as *Pickwick Papers* (1836), Dickens uses both *ain't* and *an't* for *am not*, *are not*, and *is not*, as well as *have not* and *has not*—though he also uses *haven't* and *hasn't*. This range of usage remains fairly consistent throughout much of his career, though his use of *an't* gradually declines, and he does not use *an't* at all in *Our Mutual Friend* nor in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870). Clearly there is a great deal yet to be learned about the decline of *han't* and *an't* and the spread of *ain't* in the 19th century.

Furthermore, because *ain't* and its variants are primarily spoken usages, they tend to change and shift more quickly than the codified negative contractions. In his discussion of negation, Jespersen (1961) points out that "It is always important for any hearer or reader as soon and

as precisely as possible to know whether a statement is meant as positive or negative; therefore the negative element is generally placed at the beginning of a statement and expressed as strongly and distinctly as possible" (p. 426). But as a language evolves, he continues, the negation may be weakened, and so a second important feature of negation is that it tends to be attracted to the verb. Over the history of English (and other languages), we find a fluctuation in the ways in which negation responds to these two linguistic forces (Jespersen, 1961, p. 462), and that fluctuation must play into changes in the occurrence, use, and even the pronunciation (and so, the spelling) of *ain't* and its variants, especially as they are used to represent the negation of *be* (in its copular, auxiliary, and existential functions), *have* (as both a substantive and auxiliary verb), and most recently auxiliary *do*. Add to this the pronunciation of all of these verbs in various regional, ethnic and social-class-related varieties of English, notably the rise and fall of *r*-less accents, which in turn alter the pronunciation, and so the spelling, of *ain't* and its variants. The *OED* examples provide tantalizing hints of these forces at work on *ain't*. But although it is a good place to start, the sketch of the history of *ain't* presented in the *OED* (see the articles by Donaher and Katz in this volume) is inadequate to show us how *ain't* and its variants were being used at the time of the mid-17th century origin posited by Stevens (1954) and Liberman (2014). Since Jespersen's work in the first half of the 20th century, and the publication of *WDEU* (1989), an earlier first print appearance of *an't* has been discovered in Abraham Bailey's *The Spightful Sister. A New Comedy* (1667). However, the *OED* only cites (1) below. A complete list of the relevant contractions in Bailey's play (in 2-12) shows that the situation is much more complicated. Here already we find *an't* used for

1st person singular present of *be* (*I am not*)

- (1) OCCUS: Look you, Sir, I an't for complemental words.
- (2) HARPES: An't I within my time, my Lord? (p.5)

2nd person singular present of *be* (*You are not*)

- (3) THELE: You an't burnt yet, Sir. (p. 27)

3rd person plural present of *be*

- (4) LOSANA: My hours an't my own. (p. 8)

We also find a variant form, *ean't*, used in the **3rd person singular present of *be* (*He/she/it is not*)**:

- (5) LIDORUS: Ean't he ungrateful? (p. 21)
- (6) THELE: A pill ean't half so pleasant. (p. 39)

There are also two instances of a contraction of the **3rd person singular past of *be*, *was not***, rendered as *wan't*:

- (7) LOSANA: Wan't Litus potent good enough for you? (p. 24)
- (8) THIRD CLOWN: So do, it's warm still, and so it was when we all
see it first
Wan't it? (p. 47)

We have a **subjunctive** variant, a contraction of *be not*:

- (9) BERNAIA: I wish all been't so. (p. 11)

And we also find the **imperative** contraction, *ben't*, also for *be not*:

- (10) THELE: Ben't carried away with every beauty,
And leave me (p.26)
- (11) THELE: Be diligent, ben't absent, shortly I'll send (p.46)

Lastly, we find one example of a **first person singular** contraction of *have not*, *han't*, which will continue to be used at least into the latter half of the 19th century:

- (12) PETUS: Lord, han't I had punishment? (p. 42)

So, even as early as 1667, there is already a rich range of contracted forms of *be + not* in common enough use in English speech that Bailey could use them to create his characters' dialogue. Writing just 43 years later, in his *Journal to Stella*, Jonathan Swift will use *an't* for all persons and numbers of *be + not*, though he will also use *en't* (perhaps related to Bailey's *ean't*?) four times for *is not* (one example of this last form being cited in the *OED*). And Swift uses *han't* for *have not* (though not *has not*) 17 times. The study of the precursors and variants of *ain't*, has suffered from a lack of this kind of detailed examination, a level of detail that is certainly not evidenced in the examples of contracted negatives offered in the *OED* entries for *be* and *have*. There is much more work yet to be done in examining the use of these contractions, work that will be facilitated by the increasing availability of digitized, searchable copies of these early print texts.

Montgomery (2014) provides the first results of another rich line of research into the roots, history and use of *ain't* and its variants through his

study of the *Corpus of American Civil War Letters (CACWL)*, of which he is the co-creator, and which comprises transcriptions of diaries and letters written by minimally literate Civil War soldiers from both the Union and the Confederacy. Montgomery challenges the *OED's* reliance on literary examples and the letters of educated writers; documents included in the *CACWL* must have no punctuation, "which is taken to indicate little formal schooling or reading experience" (p. 37). In this way, these documents come the closest to writing that represents their authors' speech; and since *ain't* and its variants are primarily spoken forms, used more frequently by less formally educated speakers, the further development and examination of such corpora is an important line of inquiry for arriving at a more accurate history of *ain't*.

Along with Montgomery's studies, recent work of other scholars, like John Algeo and Thomas Pyles (2005) and Walt Wolfram and Natalie Schilling-Estes (1998), has helped to expand our understanding and appreciation of *ain't*. But as we have seen, there are still many aspects of the word yet to be discovered, discussed, and examined; and most notably, there is much to be learned about its role as an essential word in many people's dialect and culture. This is particularly true post the debacle proceeding from the publication of *Webster's Third International Dictionary* in the early 1960s, when Sheridan Baker made some rather vitriolic accusations in the pages of the NCTE journal *College English* (1964) about the accuracy/legitimacy of The Linguistic Atlas project's results concerning the distribution of the word *ain't*. In his rebuttal to Baker's charges, Harold B. Allen (1965), the director of the *Linguistic Atlas of the Upper Midwest*, outlined the backgrounds of the "fourteen Type III informants [used] as a control group representing speakers of regional standard English" for the upper Midwest atlas, proving beyond doubt that all these good folks were college educated speakers, from farmers to physicians and librarians to high school principals, who used *ain't* in their spoken discourse.

The roots of the condemnation of *ain't* run deep in English letters. This history is well summarized in *WDEU* (1989, pp. 60-61). According to Barbara Strang (1970) several negative contractions—*an't* among them—enter English around 1600. A little over a century later the negative contractions were first attacked by Swift in *The Tatler* (1710) and by Joseph Addison in *The Spectator* (1711). The campaign against contracted negatives was subsequently taken up in America, first by the Reverend John Witherpoon (1781), who likewise labels such contractions as vulgar. It is Henry Alford (1866) who first singles out *ain't* for specific condemnation, a banner taken up with increasing vigor and vitriol by 19th

and 20th century pedagogues (*WDEU*, 1989, p.61). The 1960s debates following the publication of *Webster's Third* suggest both the increasing prejudice surrounding the word and the work yet to be undertaken to understand the distribution and conditions affecting the use and perceptions of *ain't* in the U.S. (for example, Archibald Hill, 1965; Jean Malmstrom, 1960; Herbert C. Morton, 1994; James A. Walker, 2005). One off-shoot of the *Webster's Third* fiasco was the creation of a Usage Panel by the publishers of Webster's rival, *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (*AHD*, 1969; 2011), the panel that Geoffrey Nunberg headed 40 years later. The 1969 *AHD* panel, however, has not been without its own critics, and it has been accused of being staffed with conservative, elitist individuals, many of whom were either born before 1900 or shortly thereafter. Indeed, it is interesting to read the list of current members of the Usage Panel, which includes many individuals who have since passed from this world, but who are still listed as on the panel.

And so we come to the current attempt to delve deeply and broadly into the nature of *ain't* and its users. The essays in this volume are divided into four sections, each representing a broad approach to the analysis of *ain't*: Authority, Authenticity, Affiliation, and Accommodation. In Section One: Authority, the authors examine the authoritative viewpoints of lexicographers, the authors of online writing guides, and the grammar of actual speakers. Patricia Donaher examines the treatment of *ain't* and other contractions in a range of dictionaries from the last 250 years. She shows how dictionaries have failed both to address the path to *ain't* as a conventionalized written form, and to provide an account of the transitions between its variant written forms. She ends with a careful study of the numerous examples of Jonathan Swift's use of *an't* in his *Journal to Stella*, drawing conclusions about differences in his private and public uses of the word. Deborah Schaffer surveys grammar- and writing-focused web sites and blogs for their treatment of *ain't*, and finds little concern about the word. Many seem to *assume* that everyone knows that *ain't* is proscribed, but several web sites actually identify appropriate uses of the word, even in formal contexts, to signal humor, oppositional attitudes, salt-of-the-earth appeal, and the *evidentiality* (i.e., common-sense obviousness) of opinions. *Ain't*, then, sometimes seems to function as taboo words always do, to demonstrate strong feelings or provoke strong reactions in at least some people. In his article, K. Aaron Smith analyzes the extension of the use of auxiliary *ain't* beyond its historical origins as a negative form of auxiliary *be* and later auxiliary *have*. In the dialects he studies, *ain't* has expanded its role to function where other dialects would use forms of *do* +

not, and appears to be drifting away from its historical sources, both formally and semantically, fulfilling the general function of a negative auxiliary.

In Section Two: Authenticity, the researchers examine the role that *ain't* plays in marking group membership and identity for native speakers of class-based, ethnic, and regional dialects. Karen Miller presents two corpus studies of preschool children's production of *ain't*, examining their use of *ain't* in order to enhance our understanding of children's acquisition of sociolinguistic variation. The study shows that preschool children from different dialect groups exhibit patterns of *ain't* usage that differ both from one another's and from those of their caregivers. Overall, caregivers produce fewer tokens of *ain't* than their children do, a finding that Miller attributes to the stigmatized status of the form. In his study of a non-Standard variety of English spoken in West Texas, John Foreman finds that, although the use of *ain't* in Negative Concord ("double negatives") and Negative Inversion (e.g. *Ain't everyone left yet*) are highly marked, the behavior of *ain't* in West Texas is constrained by regular patterns rather than being haphazard or somehow defective, and the observable facts about *ain't* form a cluster of properties predicted by what we know of varieties of Standard English. Lamont D. Antieau investigates the distribution of *ain't* in the *Linguistic Atlas of the Middle Rockies*, a collection of interviews conducted in Colorado, Utah, and Wyoming as part of the American Linguistic Atlas Projects. Although *ain't* has a limited distribution in the dataset, being used by informants in only one-third of the interviews, it is socially telling, as it is significantly correlated with the educational level of informants and enjoys greater use by males than females in the corpus. While the productivity of *ain't* is somewhat limited in the corpus, occurring as it often does in idiomatic expressions, it appears in a wide range of sentence types and often co-occurs with other non-Standard features, such as double negation. Using interviews from the West Virginia Corpus of English in Appalachia, Kirk Hazen, Jacqueline Kinnaman, Lily Holz, Madeline Vandevender, and Kevin Walden provide an account of the morphology, phonology, and vernacularity of *ain't* as it is currently used in this region of Appalachia. In addition, Hazen et al. conducted a sociolinguistic survey with a variety of native West Virginians, finding that, while the stigma of *ain't* continues into the 21st century, *ain't* persists and will continue to do so as a dynamic, complex shibboleth and identity marker in West Virginia.

In Section Three: Affiliation, the authors study the ways in which *ain't* helps speakers cast themselves as members of, or in opposition to, particular social groups. Building on previous historical research on the

literary use of *ain't*, Agnès Ragone studies the use of *ain't* among Latino speakers in comics. Comics commonly provide evidence of the popular spoken language, offering readers a glimpse into the speech of groups who do not always abide by the rules of prescriptive grammar. Her analysis establishes a roster of criteria according to which *ain't* is incorporated into the speech of the Latino segment of the American population. Michelle Braña-Straw's paper studies data from three generations of Barbadians who are assimilating to the local British English of Suffolk. Braña-Straw describes the situation in Suffolk as a post-creole contact situation, finding that first-generation Barbadians use *ain't* as a generic negator. While these forms are lost for subsequent generations, ethnic differences persist in all generations in terms of overall frequency of usage. Furthermore, Barbadians favor different linguistic contexts from Anglos and seem to have introduced an innovation—invariant *innit*. In his examination of *ain't* in the lexicon of sport, Jeffrey Segrave shows that sports personalities have deliberately used this impropriety to attract attention, provide emphasis, and invoke a storied heritage, especially in the world of baseball. Segrave argues that *ain't* mediates the tensions that shape the history of America's game: rural vs. urban, lower class vs. upper class, brawn vs. brain, white vs. black. In the despairing exclamation, "Say it ain't so," *ain't* has come to represent the enduring American narrative of betrayal and the end of innocence.

In Section Four: Accommodation, the contributors examine how and why authors deploy *ain't* in their works in creating personae. In his article, Rudy Loock provides a corpus-based analysis of *ain't* in literary texts translated into English from other languages, as opposed to literary texts originally written in English. He finds that *ain't* is much rarer in the translated texts. Loock explains this difference in terms of both translation universals and conservatism. He also investigates the differences in the linguistic environments of *ain't* in translated versus original texts. This study thus aims to provide a substantial description of the use of *ain't* in fiction translated into English. *Ain't* often sparks linguistic prejudice, as do other common features of stereotypical Southern American English dialects as they are presented on television. James Mitchell's study focuses on two episodes of the Fox network drama *Bones* that include Southern dialect characters. These episodes illustrate prejudice against Southern dialects, the feelings of linguistic inferiority that language prejudice creates for Southern speakers, and how Southern speakers resist these stereotypes and find ways to combat them. Finally, Seth Katz tests the claim that *ain't* was once an acceptable upper-class usage by analyzing the examples of *ain't* and its variants in the *OED*. He finds that, overwhelmingly, *ain't* is "spoken" by

people who are members of non-elite social groups, illiterate, vulgar, or objects of humor. Educated speakers of Standard dialects may use *ain't* informally, for emphasis or humor, but, as far as the *OED* examples reveal, such speakers do not use *ain't* in the same formal, written contexts where they may securely use other contractions.

We have assembled this book dedicated to the topic of the single word *ain't* in order to shed a bright light on the versatility, beauty, and vibrancy of the word in past and modern English—something not yet achieved in the previous works that have made some effort to examine the word within some context of English.

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I.

AUTHORITY

. . . the agonizing deappraisals of *Webster's Third International* show that any red-blooded American would prefer incest to *ain't*.
—James H. Sledd, *Language*, July-September 1964.

A(i)n't is merely colloquial, and as used for *isn't* is an uneducated blunder and serves no useful purpose.
—Sir Ernest Gowers (Ed.). *Fowler's Modern English Grammar*, 1965, p. 52.

CHAPTER ONE

AIN'T IN THE DICTIONARY

PATRICIA DONAHER

Abstract: Though it has often been vilified, and even demonized in the debacle following the publication of *Webster's Third International Dictionary*, *ain't* has been, despite children's playground wisdom to the contrary, "in the dictionary." Indeed, it has been in many of them. Patricia Donaher examines the treatment of *ain't* and other contractions in a range of dictionaries from the last 250 years. She shows how dictionaries have failed both to address the path to *ain't* as a conventionalized written form, and to provide an account of the transitions between its variant written forms. Dictionaries have likewise failed to explain, first, why other contractions have become acceptable, while *ain't* has been deemed unacceptable; and second, why *ain't* has remained unacceptable in spite of its common use in the language of middle class and aristocratic characters in comedy, drama, and fiction from the mid-seventeenth century through the end of the eighteenth century, and even by the educated American speakers surveyed for the *Dictionary of American Regional English (DARE)*. More tellingly, Donaher questions why such an ardent enemy of the growing use of contractions as Jonathan Swift would make such extensive use of *an't* (a variant of *ain't*) and other contractions in his letters and private writings, while never using those words in his public works. She offers a careful study of the numerous examples of Swift's use of *an't* in his *Journal to Stella*, and points to the need for further research into the private and public uses of *ain't* and its variants as a means to constructing a clearer understanding of the history and evolution of *ain't*, so much of which has to date been ignored or avoided by the most authoritative and comprehensive dictionaries, including *The Oxford English Dictionary*.

Introduction

Perhaps you remember that playground moment: you know, the one where a budding language critic informed you that "*ain't* isn't a word 'cause it's not in the dictionary! (so there, haha on you)"? Being of at least a minor inquiring mind, I asked the school librarian to show me; and darned if she wasn't convinced this was the case, that she would not find *ain't* in the dictionary. And then, much to her consternation, it was there! This is the first frame for my investigation, or more of a pondering, that has lasted about 40 years, and finished with my own nephew's authentic use of *ain't* as an expression of his own Southern Indiana language heritage as it converged with my own training in language and semiotics in that moment of "*aha!* I should investigate further."

The problem with *ain't* is that it's tainted—tainted by its inaccurate portrayal in some dictionaries, tainted by both well-intentioned and ill-intentioned scholars, tainted by its place in dialect studies, and most of all, tainted by an incomplete historical record. I don't believe there is another word in the whole of the English language that has spawned vehement debate, both national and scholarly, over its inclusion in a dictionary, like that of the debate over the inclusion of *ain't* in *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* (*Webster's Third*, 1961). Not only was the word vilified multiple times in almost every national and local newspaper during the early 1960s, but it also spawned a heated scholarly debate within the pages of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) journal *College English*. The scholarly dispute was prompted primarily by Sheridan Baker's (1964) vicious—and proven to be erroneous—assertions about the interviewee bias of the Linguistic Atlas results, but the attacks by the press were, well, irrepressible. James Sledd and Wilma R. Ebbitt recorded the journalistic furor over the publication of the dictionary, of which Sledd (1962) was the editor, in *Dictionaries and that dictionary*. Pages and pages are devoted to one or another newspaper editorialist denouncing the dictionary's inclusion of *ain't*, with each paper seeming to vie for both the best and most inventive invective. For example, a September 9, 1961, piece in *The Chicago Daily News* avers that "while flinching at 'seen,' the lexicographers justify the word *ain't* on the ground that it is 'used orally in most parts of the United States by cultivated speakers.' Cultivated, our foot. *Ain't* still makes its user stand out like Simple Simon in a roomful of nuclear physicists" (p. 55).

The Varied Functions of *ain't*

Certainly, the investigation of the individual word *ain't* is essential to any English dialect study because of its extensive use as a non-Standard form both in the US and the UK and because of its versatility as a verb form to mean *am not*, *aren't*, and *isn't*, as well as *hasn't*, *haven't*, *didn't*, and *doesn't*. While formal English requires that negative contractions are marked for person and number, *ain't* has no such requirement and can replace six formal English contractions in addition to acting as a contraction for "am not." Thus, *ain't* can be used in the negative present tense contracted form of *be* in constructions like "There ain't nothing in what he says" and as a contracted auxiliary in constructions like "He said that ain't gonna happen." It can function as the negative present tense of the contracted auxiliary *have* in that old joke, "I ain't got one single flea in my hair, they're all married" (qtd in Jenny Cheshire, 1981, p. 365). And it can function, as a replacement for the past tense auxiliary *didn't*, in constructions like "I ain't go to school today." In her article "Variation in the use of *ain't* in an urban British English dialect," Cheshire sees these varied uses for the single word as "typifying a general trend in non-Standard dialects toward the simplification of linguistic systems" (p. 366). She goes on to note, though, that "the fact that the one form, *ain't*, is used for two [or really more] verbs that are quite distinct in meaning and in syntactic function . . . is an unusual phenomenon" in any language and, thus, worthy of further study (p. 366). However, though it is worth including in dialect study, *ain't* is not easily separated from its place as a marker of a particular non-Standard form, like BEV or Southern American English, and therefore it is hard to imagine *ain't* as an historical representation of contractions in general.

In fact, where this linguistic phenomenon comes from is very difficult to trace, in part because its early transmutation occurred in the oral vernacular and so there are fewer traces of the descent of *ain't* in written discourse. Moreover, the available historical record so far is actually pretty scant. We know, for example, there were contractions in use during the Middle English period. Martin Stevens (1954) confidently retraces one such contraction in, "The derivation of *ain't*," showing that *won't* "is the product of an alternate present indicative form, *wol*, in the East Midland dialect, which both Gower and Chaucer use frequently" and that "*won't* could not have had its origin in the North, where the present indicative was invariably *wil* or *wel*" (p. 198). He goes on to hypothesize that "Quite the same type of dialectal origin may exist for the word *ain't*, which might be derived from the shortened Northern English verb *ha* combined with the

negative *not*" (p. 198). The fact is that we don't know for sure, but there are theories. First, as Otto Jespersen espoused in the 1940s in his *Modern Grammar on Historical Principles*, *ain't* might be derived phonologically from *aren't*, with *are not* becoming *arnt*, with *arnt* losing its [r] sound while lengthening its vowel into something like [a:nt], from which *ain't* could develop naturally (Vol. V, p. 433).¹ A second theory, presented by Stevens but attributed to a lecture by Anders Orbeck, is that *am not* shifted into the form *amn't*, which speakers assimilated as *an n't*. Orbeck then theorizes that there was a simplification followed by the lengthening of the vowel, eventually to a diphthong (p. 199). A third theory, from E. Payson Willard (1936), is that *ain't* is derived from the contracted verb *have*, where the verb is pronounced in certain dialects as it is in a word like *behave* or the British *halfpenny*. The initial aspirate [h] (the initial puff of air heard in pronunciation) would disappear in unstressed usage (p. 2). Given that *ain't* can serve both as a negative *be* verb and a negative *have* verb, this last theory may not be as odd as it sounds. Moreover, differing pronunciations for a verb has historical precedence. In the preliminary material to her study of working-class speech in Reading, England, Cheshire (1981) reminds us that during

. . . the Middle English period many of the irregular verb forms had two pronunciations, of which one predominated in positive sentences and the other in negative sentences. This meant that the contracted negative forms were clearly distinguished from the positive forms, and there could be no confusion of meaning (as in the case, for example, of *can* [kæn] and *can't* [kɑ:nt] in British English today). The verb *have*, then, would have had two forms: one with a short vowel, used in positive sentences, and one with a long vowel, used in negative sentences. (pp. 366-367)

Still, we have no exact record of the entrance of *ain't* into the English language, just logical theories about how certain phonological parameters may have evolved.

***Ain't* B.D. – Before Dictionaries**

To get at the early, pre-dictionary story of *ain't*, it is necessary to examine its development and usage in the comedies of the 1600s—just those works where the earliest written uses of *ain't* have been noted. My work would be a follow up to Jespersen's (1940) brief and generally uninformative notation about *ain't* appearing in the comedies of John Dryden, William Congreve, and George Farquhar. The language of the comedies is markedly more informal than the language of the period's

dramas; and presumably, the informal comedic language is a representation of the informal spoken language of the time. Thus, I examined the earliest copies I could obtain of particular 17th century plays that might contain contracted forms, especially comedies, parodies, or pieces that might contain examples of regional or class dialect, including plays by the mid-century writers Cavendish, Shadwell, Dryden, William D'Avenant, Thomas Duffett, and George Etherege, and then compared my findings to the data gathered on basic contractions used by the late-century playwrights Congreve and Farquhar. In addition, I examined some of Ben Jonson's plays for contractions in general in the early 1600s. I discuss my findings below.

Dictionaries – What They Can and Can't Do

It would be interesting to study what a dictionary can and cannot tell us about the language, as each dictionary has its own internal logic, which we must guess at as we make our way around the text. What we see we assume to be generally authoritative. What we don't see, we often don't bother to notice, since dictionaries *are* limited vehicles. How interesting would it be for Dr. Johnson to view the *OED* and realize that a dictionary *can* "fix" language to some extent? Or at least how much it can influence public opinion on the place or non-place of a particular word in someone's vocabulary. I wonder if he would have changed some of his pronouncements were he aware of the authority wielded by the lexicographer.

Given this authority, it should come as no surprise that *ain't* has been a particularly hot-button topic for folk since the 1961 publication of *Webster's Third*. It appears, though, if one looks at a selection of dictionaries since Dr. Johnson's momentous 1755 publication, that *ain't* wasn't always among the top ten language pet peeves and that its varying treatment in dictionaries bespeaks a diversity of time periods, speakers, cultures, and regions. What then of the great historical and regional dictionaries? Dictionaries provide us with some evidence of the word's entrance into written discourse, so while these sources are not in uniform agreement on the earliest literary date for *ain't*, they do provide us with an abbreviated etymological history.

The usage notes in several dictionaries, including the fourth edition of *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (*AHD*), trace the first appearance of *ain't* in print to 1778, as an evolution of *an't*, a contraction of *are not* and *am not* used in the 1600s. By the 19th century, other contractions like *don't* and *won't* had gained legitimacy, but *ain't* was decied as a "vulgarism" in part because it was more loosely associated